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ABSTRACT

Critical thinking skills are inherent in limited preparation forensic activities which, with some modification, can be successfully incorporated in virtually any classroom situation. Furthermore, extemporaneous and impromptu speaking provide educators with certain advantages over debate activities in terms of assessment and classroom logistics. In general, more work needs to be done to explore the connections between forensic and instructional interests. Too often, forensic research is dismissed because it deals with "pedagogy" in the pejorative sense. Extemporaneous speaking nearly always involves one of the many facets of critical thinking delineated by Howell, Bremeck, McPeck, Guilford or Chuska. It requires the speakers, for instance, to answer questions specific to a subject matter, to develop metaphorical arguments quickly, or to explain unknown premises in terms of ideas that are known to them. In the classroom, extemporaneous assignments to individual students eliminate some of the competition and inequality inherent in group debates. Further, it requires that the instructor formulate questions for the speakers and therefore think critically about the issues at hand. Specific assignments might involve a list of extemporaneous questions that students could research and deliver on the first day of a unit. Later, as a review, the instructor might ask each student to summarize ideas and concepts in an impromptu manner. (Contains 16 references.) (TB)

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Critical thinking pedagogy: Opportunities to take limited preparation beyond the realm of competition

by

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Running head: OPPORTUNITIES

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With teeth bared and claws exposed, critics of modern educational practices have been patiently circling their prey for years, waiting for an opportunity to attack. Educators have occasionally been put on guard by subject-specific complaints which have nipped at the ankles of our educational foundations, but for the most part we have managed to avoid a full-scale frontal onslaught. However, recently the curriculum predators managed to identify an educational weakling--"critical thinking" abilities. The ensuing feeding frenzy turned education on its ear, scrambling to find ways to give students the skills they will need if they are to survive "out there" in the "real world". The frantic search for specific methods of instilling these abilities in our students has led at least one researcher to lament, "The teaching of 'critical thinking' and 'higher order skills' . . . is in danger of becoming another educational fad, here today and gone tomorrow" (Carr, 1988, p. 69).

As communication scholars, however, we may boast that these " . . . buzz words in education . . ." (Carr, 1988, p. 69) have long been a concern in our field. For instance, Howell (1943, p. 96), Brembeck (1949, p. 177), Cable (1949, p. 21), and Barnlund (1952, p. 86) were among the first to publish articles concerning "critical thinking" and education. Many (Howell, 1943; Johnson & Johnson, 1988; Ulrich, 1991, to name a few) have extolled the virtues of competitive and modified classroom debates for teaching higher order thinking skills, but relatively few have examined the usefulness of debate's cousin; "limited preparation" activities, or extemporaneous and impromptu speaking. It is our assertion that

the purposes of limited preparation events provide educators with the special tools necessary to build greater intellectual dexterity into modern curricula. Specifically, by staying true to the method and purpose of "limited preparation", while modifying its definition and expanding its boundaries outside the context of competition, educators of all subjects may be better able to provide their students with more opportunities to engage in "higher order" thinking. Therefore, with the authority dubiously vested in us by virtue of our combined forensic and teaching experience at the secondary and post-secondary levels, we advance the following arguments.

Initially, we argue that critical thinking skills are inherent in limited preparation forensic activities which, with some modification, can be successfully incorporated in virtually any classroom situation. Second, extemporaneous and impromptu speaking provides educators with certain advantages over debate activities in terms of assessment and classroom logistics.

An additional purpose of this paper is heuristic in nature. We wish to provide impetus for future research which bridges the boundaries between forensic and instructional interests. Too often, forensic research is dismissed because it deals with "pedagogy" in the pejorative sense. Few, however, refer to "critical thinking" or "questioning" research as pedagogy. In light to this observation, we concur with McKerrow (1990) who asserts, "In those instances where there is ambivalence about doing [forensic] research, or where such research is held as suspect, a

faculty member needs to make a conscious decision about what research he or she engages in" (p. 73). We assert that the best interests of forensic educators are well served by pursuing research in areas, such as critical thinking, which link our activity to the broader spectrum of communication studies.

Linking Limited Preparation and Critical Thinking

An argument for utilizing limited preparation events to enhance critical thinking abilities must necessarily begin with a definition of our terms. Howell (1943, p. 97) and Brembeck (1949, p. 177) both cite the designers of the Watson-Glaser tests of critical thinking:

> . . . critical thinking involves a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends, as well as the ability to recognize problems, to weigh evidence, to comprehend and use language with accuracy and discrimination, to interpret data, to recognize the existence (or non-existence) of logical relationships between propositions, to draw warranted conclusions and generalizations and to test the conclusions by applying them to new situations to which they seem pertinent.

McPeck's definition (cited in Brell 1990, p. 53) offers a concise notion of critical thinking as, "the appropriate use of reflective skepticism to establish good reasons for various beliefs." These definitions are more completely operationalized in the skills commonly associated with critical thinking. Guilford (1952) notes reasoning, creative thinking, evaluation, and planning abilities are essential to the thinking process (p. 51). Chuska (cited in Grice and

Jones 1989) identified what he considered to be the most common skills mentioned in the thinking skills literature. These include:

> Comparing, classifying, estimating, summarizing, hypothesizing, synthesizing, sequencing, predicting, evaluating, translating, reorganizing, prioritizing, setting criteria, goal setting, problem solving, decision making, justifying, making assumptions, using analogies, imagining, logical deducing, identifying pros/cons, identifying propaganda, identifying consequences, observing, creating/designing, and interpreting (p. 338).

This prodigious list of skills may appear, at first glance, to defy an instructor's incorporation of any of them into classroom activities. However, as Kuhn (1992) suggests:

> If . . . cognitive skills exist in implicit form before they appear more explicitly, the educational challenge becomes . . . one of reinforcing and strengthening skills already present . . . rather than instilling skills that are absent. The difference is important, for once a skill is in place, even in rudimentary form, the most obvious method of strengthening it is through practice (p. 174).

Kuhn's (1992) conclusion is based on her study of what she defines as "rhetorical argument" and its relationship to thinking skills (p. 157). The skills involved in Kuhn's rhetorical argument include recognizing opposition between two assertions, relating supporting and refuting evidence to the assertions, and integrating and weighing the evidence in order to evaluate the merit of the competing assertions.

A great majority--if not all--of the above skills may be introduced and/or reinforced through the argumentative strategies and persuasive appeals inherent in extemporaneous speaking, with the purpose of answering a question specific to current events (in

the competitive sense) or to subject matter (in the classroom sense) and impromptu speaking, with the purpose of quickly developing metaphorical arguments which explain or describe unknown premises in terms of ideas which are known by the speaker. At the same time, it is important to keep McCrery's (1952) assertion in mind: " . . . extempore speaking is not synonymous with impromptu speaking" (p. 234).

In terms of extemporaneous speaking, for example, Kay and Aden (cited in Aden, 1992, p. 179) argue, "In addition to informing [the] audience, [the extemporaneous speaker] must convince [the] audience of the importance of the information and the correctness of [the speaker's] interpretation of the information". Aden (1992) illustrates the skills inherent in extemporaneous speaking by indicating the speaker must:

> . . . *analyze* (1) the questions available and (2) the temporal context surrounding the selected question . . . the speaker should then engage in *synthesis* to (3) select persuasive reasons that justify the answer to the question and (4) marshal sufficient resources to support the reasons selected (p. 179).

Such an approach constitutes what Preston (1992) labels a "literal analysis" (p. 21), resulting in a direct answer to a specific question. In contrast, Preston points out that impromptu speaking requires the speaker to interpret a resolution and take a stand on it, providing an indirect, metaphorical response to the question. Implementing metaphorical argument, Preston asserts, "enables the student to think up and then discuss objects of experience, and

the use of those objects in illuminating whether or not a topic provides a metaphor for those experiences" (p. 22).

When used properly, extemporaneous and impromptu speaking exercises are more than simple recollection and recitation of facts. Their purpose is not merely to inform, but rather to analyze a question or proposition, research, synthesize, and evaluate supporting information, assert an answer or response, and argue for the answer using justification from the research or individual experience.

Having illustrated the connection between higher-order thinking skills and the purposes and methods of limited preparation events, we now turn our attention to facilitation. We argue that the facilitation of critical thinking experiences, carried out through limited preparation-like activities, is at the same time possible and practical. In addition, we will explore the logistical and assessment benefits that these activities provide over organized classroom debates.

Facilitating Classroom Limited Preparation Activities

It is initially important to reiterate that we do not necessarily advocate the classroom use of impromptu and extemporaneous speaking in the strict manner through which it is carried out in competitive forensics. We, instead, wholeheartedly agree with Endres (1992), who points out, " . . . the forensic environment and the classroom environment are not interchangeable. Neither are they incompatible. With adaptation,

facets of forensic competition such as the impromptu speech, can be appropriately incorporated into the classroom" (p. 14). Kuhn's (1992) perception of how to facilitate thinking skills reinforces this observation:

> . . . it is not difficult to envision how students might be engaged in the practice of thinking. Their own theories of familiar social-science topics could serve as starting points . . . Students could be asked for evidence to justify their theories, and their thinking could then be probed using the argumentative framework of alternative theories, counterargument, and rebuttal . . . Because of the link between (social and internal) argument, social argument is an ideal vehicle for developing . . . thinking. Social dialogue offers us a way to externalize the internal thinking strategies we would like to foster within the individual, an externalization that serves not only the researcher's objective of analysis, but also the practical objective of facilitation (p. 174).

Of course, virtually every academic endeavor is in some sense performed with "limited preparation"--students have deadlines to meet, priorities to set, and assignments to complete. However, in this vein, we perceive "limited preparation" to encompass time limits from three minutes-in the case of impromptu activities modeled after forensics-to two or three days for extemporaneous exercises. These extemporaneous constraints allow students time to adequately research and prepare an extemporaneous presentation on a given question, while maintaining the critical thinking parallel. Of course, these limits may be altered at the discretion of the instructor to facilitate class size, grade level of students,

accessibility of materials, etceteras. While time limits may be altered to fit logistical classroom needs, it is important to keep in mind the purposes served by allowing only a limited amount of preparation time. The limited preparation activity need not become a test of elocution (as those skills are served very well in most public speaking classes, which offer students the opportunity to practice composition and delivery through prepared speaking activities). Instead, primary concerns should focus on reasoning, invention, argumentation, evaluation, and other critical skills.

Like other authors (see, for example Fritz & Weaver, 1986, p. 174), we will tentatively venture into the arena of prescriptive activities. However, unlike many other authors, we envision these activities taking place in virtually any subject-specific classroom setting. For instance, instructors might develop a list of extemporaneous questions which ask students to research various issues involved in an upcoming unit. The previously assigned speeches would take place on the first day of the unit, serving simultaneously as an introduction to the class and as a pool of prospective arguments to explore as the unit unfolds. Essentially, students contribute their ideas and analysis to the class, which opens the opportunity for further explanation and debate.

If we then jump forward to the unit's conclusion, we are presented with a way to incorporate impromptu speaking. As a review, the instructor may ask each student to summarize ideas and concepts in an impromptu manner. Students would be required to discuss the concept not only in terms of examples learned

through the course of the unit, but also to incorporate analogous knowledge from previous lessons to the issue at hand.

Obviously, these suggestions are limited in scope. However, we are confident in the abilities of professional educators to apply the processes of limited preparation to their classrooms in a variety of ways. Other ideas we have brainstormed include impromptu speaking based on objects, narrative story topics, philosophical quotations, and one-word topics. Extemporaneous topics might revolve around historical explanations, current issues, and/or criticisms.

Advantages of Limited Prep. Activities

While classroom debates certainly have many valuable assets for practicing critical thinking skills, we claim several distinct advantages by using limited preparation activities. First, classroom debates often consist of "teams" arguing the pros and cons of a given proposition. The nature of the activity is inherently adversarial and overtly competitive, which can promote alienation of certain students. With limited preparation activities, there is not a "winner" or "loser", but rather a pool of arguments which may be further explored and addressed.

Second, individual assessment of students is simplified by substituting limited preparation activities for classroom debates. When groups debate one-another, the instructor must attempt to weigh the level of participation of many students. In large classes this "weighing" may become a difficult proposition. Classroom debate, like any group function, makes it difficult to determine

who is "doing the work" and who is "along for the ride". Individual activities can alleviate this problem.

Finally, formulating questions requires instructors, themselves, to think critically about the types of issues and topics they will incorporate into the curriculum. These activities also engage instructors in the types of critical evaluation and assessment that we are advocating to our students. Both students and instructors benefit from the higher order questioning skills that will result from the limited preparation process.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have illustrated parallels between the skills outlined in critical thinking literature and those inherent in limited preparation activities patterned after a forensic model. We have also made suggestions as to how these activities might be incorporated in any classroom situation, and have claimed some advantages through using these activities rather than, or in conjunction with, group debates.

By addressing this paper to forensic educators and communication scholars, we are undoubtedly showing faulty audience analysis. After all, we have long known that our activities promote critical thinking, and have--on occasion--flaunted this fact in front of our fellow educators as if it were a divine gift. Unfortunately, to some extent our confidence has trapped us in what Klumpp (1990) terms "pontification" (p. 79).

We do not proclaim to be innocent of this charge ourselves, but we assert that future forensic research needs to link our activity

to the broader field of research. As Klumpp suggests, " . . . concentrated powers of analysis honed by careful research work with public discourse will bring connections between forensics skills and public life more overtly to the surface of both our research and our forensics contests" (p. 83).

Experimentally testing the claims we have forwarded in this paper may be one way to accomplish this goal. In the meantime, incorporating modified versions of traditional forensic events into the classroom will ultimately, we believe, help to keep the curriculum predators at bay.

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